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ABSTRACT

The reader-response journal has proven useful in the literature-based composition class; it is also useful in the literature survey at the sophomore or junior level of college. Survey courses have a standard protocol that students have come to expect. In these classes, the teacher is an expert who lectures on historical background, trends, and author's lives, and who explains the literature. The students take it all in and parrot it back from time to time on an exam. While not all the informational aspects of the survey lack redeeming value, what is too often neglected is the development of students' sense of their own critical powers. In the reader-response model, each student has a chance to articulate his or her response prior to class. During the class, the teacher's role is not to lecture but to encourage a free and fruitful exchange of ideas. Writing about literature in a personal way is a new experience for many students. But samples from journal entries show that a transformation is possible when students are asked to internalize the literature and reflect on its importance to them. (Contains two figures and a sample of the journal writing assignment.) (TB)

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THE ORGANIC LITERATURE CLASS:
A READER-RESPONSE JOURNAL APPROACH

The reader-response journal has proven useful in the literature-based composition class; what about its role in a literature survey at the sophomore or junior level of college? I would like to explain how the reader's journal can transform the traditional survey and the traditional student.

Survey courses have a standard protocol which students come to expect. In these classes, the teacher is an expert who lectures on historical background, trends, and authors' lives, and who explains the literature (see Fig. 1). The students take it all in and parrot it back from time to time on an exam. Leave out any element--even the exam--and you hear howls of protest.

While not all of the informational aspects of the survey lack redeeming value, what is too often neglected is the development of students' sense of their own critical powers and--just as important--their ability to engage themselves personally with works of literature. The reader's journal--combined with a reader-response approach to class

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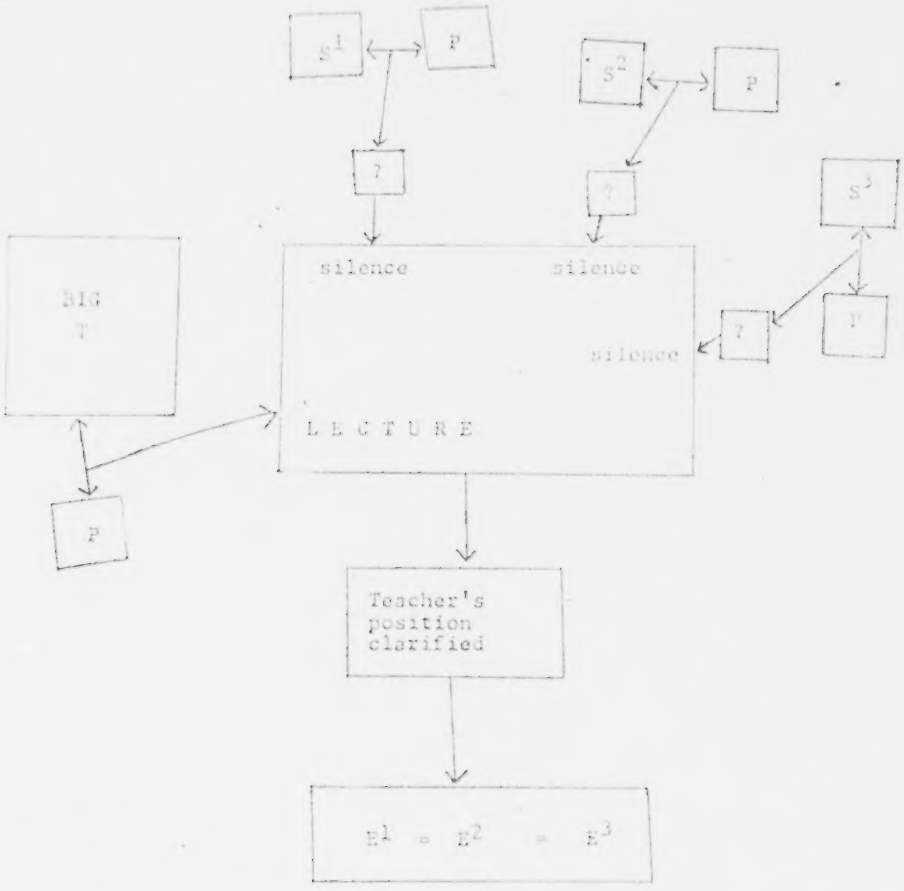
S Student
T Teacher
P Plea
E Study

Fig. 1 AUTHORITARIAN MODEL



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discussion--is crucial to awakening students to the varied connections between literature and themselves.

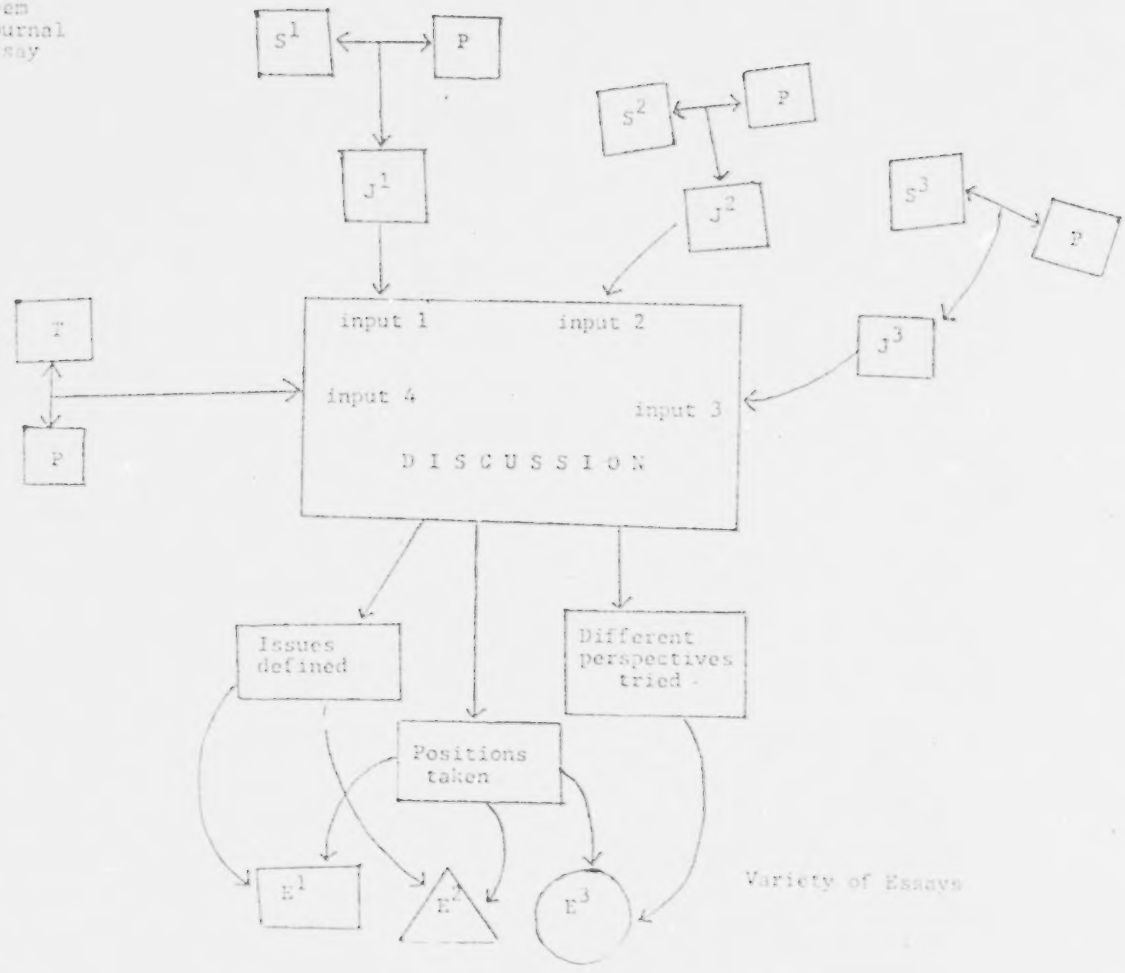
In the reader-response model each student has a chance to articulate his or her response prior to class (see Fig. 2). During class the teacher's role is not to lecture, but to encourage a free and fruitful exchange of ideas. Afterward, each student has a clearer picture of what the issues are and where he or she stands in regard to them. The ensuing essays reflect this individuality. Instead of clamoring for more lectures, students come to appreciate the thought and feeling exchanged in discussion.

Writing about literature in a personal way is a new experience for most students in my survey classes. I try to help by providing a set of suggested topics like those in the appendix.

It may take weeks for a student to adapt to this more subjective mode of writing. A senior named Glema, for example, came to my modern British literature class well trained in analyzing poetry and fiction, but she had never before been asked for her personal reaction to literature. Through the first half of her journal, the typical entry was a paraphrase or summary of the work, often enhanced by observant detail, but

S student
T teacher
P poem
J journal
E essay

Fig. 2 READER-RESPONSE MODEL



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written in a style as objective as a lab report. Her entry on Wilfred Owen's "Insensibility" illustrates Glema's approach:

> In this poem, Owen describes how different soldiers cope with the horror around them on the battlefield. Some men force themselves to restrain their feelings both for others or for themselves. Others curb their imaginations. Soldiers at home avoid thinking about the war. Owen feels that the worst soldiers of all are the dullards because their stupid, unimaginative, and insensitive state makes them wretched and mean. Owen uses the device of assonance in this poem. For example, he employs it in stanza 4 as he states, "The long, forlorn, relentless trend." This close repetition of similiar vowel sounds gives emphasis to the feelings being created in the poem. Note also how he uses the word "happy" at the beginning of stanzas 1, 3, and 4. This word accomplishes two things. First, its repetition ties different parts of the poem together. Second, the poet is expressing irony concerning the war through this word.

Each time I read Glema's journal, I asked for more personal comment, but nothing changed until I wrote this note on page 59:

Your summaries are clear and usually on target. However, I see two problems: first, I sometimes feel as if I'm reading my own words, spoken in class. Second, you aren't taking the opportunity to express your personal reaction. Every entry is about what the speaker says, what the poem says, etc. What does Glema say? Use the word I more often.

The result was dramatic. My specific request for the word I must have turned on a light for her, because the very next entry begins with "My first reaction to Waiting for Godot is that everything is so bleak," and it uses the word I thirteen times, almost as if the sudden freedom to say "I" had gone to her head.

Every entry thereafter focused on the personal, as these opening sentences illustrates:

> I enjoyed this play [Shaw's Arms and the Man] because of its underlying themes, such as the look at women's role in society at the time in which the play is set.
>
> This poem ["Piano" by D.H. Lawrence] reminds me of my grandmother's parlor. She owned a big black organ, and I used to love to watch as she pumped up and down on the foot pedals. However, Grandmother's parlor wasn't cozy like the one Lawrence remembers.

> I liked this poem [Lawrence's "Snake"]. It's interesting to think of the snake as the speaker's guest.

Something else happened: the style grew more relaxed. An entry on "Marriage a la Mode" by Katherine Mansfield begins this way:

> What a group of jerks Isabel has for friends! I don't understand why William tolerates them.

Even Glema's handwriting became bigger and freer. Meanwhile, her skill at close observation and analysis did not diminish but continued to inform her writing.

In her final evaluation Glema wrote:

> I think I gained more confidence and more ability to to express my thought in class discussions. I feel as if I have grown mentally since I began this course.

What happens for the survey class as a whole is parallel: when readers' responses are valued, the class becomes freer, more relaxed, more personal, more human.

Appendix: A Reader's Journal

Use the journal as a place to record your reactions to the readings and to what is said in class, and as a place to explore ideas that you will use in your essays. You can complete the 40-page requirement by writing three to four pages per week and responding to every assigned reading. Attach this page inside your journal, and use these suggested topics when you need a starting point for your writing.

1. Tell how you feel toward this work or this author, and why.

2. Write about any difficulties or frustrations involved in reading this work.

3. Write about something you don't understand; try to write your way to an answer.

4. Write about the way this work confirms or confronts your beliefs.

5. Write about something in this work that reminds you of someone you know or of something that has happened in your life.

6. Describe what it felt like to read this work, what sort of experience it was.

7. Write about an idea expressed in the work (or in class) which you agree or disagree with.

8. Write about what is effective in the way the work is written.

9. Explore a social or ethical issue raised by the work; judge the behavior of the characters, or the views of the author, as right or wrong.

10. Interpret a work or a part of it; tell what it means and why you think it means that; explain the work's overall significance or message.

11. Compare things: how are two works (or two characters, themes, authors, etc.) alike and different?

12. Write about something new you learned from reading the work.

13. Write about something that surprised you, angered you, delighted you, or evoked any strong reaction as you were reading the work. Write about anything that stays on your mind after reading.

14. In what ways does this work reflect its time, its literary period, or the personality of its author?

15. How would you go about making this work more accessible to readers of today?